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ABSTRACT

Examples are given of real lexical errors made by learner writers, and consideration is given to the way in which three learners' dictionaries could deal with the lexical items that were misused. The dictionaries were the "Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary," the "Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English," and the "Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary." The question examined is what happens when a student consults a dictionary when uncertain about a choice of word or to understand why a word choice was marked wrong. It is noted that a major feature of learners' dictionaries is that they include grammatical and phonetic information to help learners produce language, but the lexical-semantic information in dictionaries provides little help in terms of language production or context. Three types of lexical errors related to context are discussed: errors of register, collocational errors, and errors of meaning. It is concluded that dictionaries tend to be judged by the number of types of headwords listed and the ease with which the definitions can be understood; however, the three dictionaries examined are shown to seriously mislead the student even in the choice of comparatively common words. Suggestions are offered to guide dictionary makers in their compilation of any new production-oriented dictionary. Contains 7 references. (LB)

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DO DICTIONARIES HELP STUDENTS WRITE?

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Introduction

In this paper I shall give some examples of real lexical errors made by learner writers, and consider the way in which three learners' dictionaries, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (ALD), the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) and the Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary (CULD), deal with the lexical items that have been misused. I would like to show what happens when a student turns to the dictionary because he is uncertain about a choice of word, or because he wants to understand why his choice of word has been marked wrong. The evidence from user surveys (Yorkey 1979; Scholfield 1982) suggests that learners use learners' dictionaries much more commonly for receptive than for productive use, but before we try to change the disctionary users' habits, and assign a key role to the dictionary in the writing class, we need to find out whether dictionaries provide the right kind of information for language production. If learners rarely consult dictionaries when writing, is this not because the dictionaries themselves are primarily geared to helping them to read?

A major feature of learners' dictionaries is that they include grammatical and phonetic information to help learners to produce language. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary has Hornby's famous verb patterns, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English has a more elaborate system with patterns for verbs and other parts of speech, and Chambers Universal Learners' Dictionary gives grammar notes for individual entries. This kind of material, however, seems to be merely tacked on to works with a traditional design. The most important part of the dictionary entry, the lexical-semantic information, shows little sign of change or development in the direction of production, as Scholfield (1979) and Jain (1981) point out.

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Types of Lexical Error

Errors are errors because they are inappropriate in the context in which they appear. By 'context', however, we may mean many things. Fillmore (1976), not of course discussing lexis at the time, interprets it in three ways:

> We can speak of the context of an utterance (or utterance fragment) and intend by that either the real world situation in which the utterance is produced, or the other utterances that surround it in discourse. We can also speak of the context of the experience or precept that makes up the base of our understanding of the word.

With reference to Fillmore's interpretation of context I have divided the lexical errors into three types:

- Context = 'the real word situation in which the utterance is produced.' The error is a question of inappropriate register.
- Context = 'the other utterances that surround it in discourse.' The error is a result of incomplete knowledge of the collocational range of the words involved.
- Context = 'the experience or precept which makes up the base of our understanding of a word.' The error is a question of mistaken identity.

I regard this categorisation simply as a convenient means of grouping the errors for discussion. The errors in my survey, however, were not evenly divided between the three categories. The majority fell into the third category as errors of mistaken identity, and inappropriate register accounted for only a small proportion of my sample. Register may have been less of a problem because the texts I dealt with were about half way along the scale of formality, being neither communications between friends nor impersonal technical compositions. This is the register which students with a grounding of General English know best.

In my original survey I looked at about 35 lexical errors, taken mostly from placement test answers written by overseas postgraduate students at Aston University. For reasons of space I will now discuss only ten of the most interesting examples: two errors of register, four collocational errors and four errors of meaning.

Category 1: Errors of register

Impermeable: CLOTHES IMPERMEABLE (to wear when cycling)

There is a syntactic error in the positioning of the adjective, but the writer's meaning is quite clear. WATERPROOF would be an acceptable alternative. CULD gives 'tech' as a marker of appropriate register in the entry for IMPERMEABLE. ALD's definition: (formal) that cannot be permeated esp. by fluids is not a particularly useful one for receptive use as the learner who does not know IMPERMEABLE is not likely to know PERMEATE. The error in my survey was one of register rather than of meaning, however, and ALD's 'formal' marker is inadequate to indicate this. (The OED's spec. in physics is more precise.)

LDOCE gives no indication of register; this deficiency could have been obviated by referring the reader to the entry for WATERPROOF as the definition of WATERPROOF specifies (too narrowly, in fact) an outer garment. All three dictionaries fail to give a less formal/technical alternative for IMPERMEABLE.

Before: MY PARENTS NEVER SPOKE ABOUT SERIOUS MATTERS BEFORE US.

I take BEFORE to mean here in the presence of, for which sense CULD has the marker 'formal'. CULD gives as an example the criminal appeared before the judge and ALD uses a similar sentence to illustrate BEFORE with this meaning, although it does not give any indication of appropriate register. ALD does give a warning about the use of BEFORE as contrasted with BEHIND: except in a few phrases IN FRONT OF is preferred to BEFORE. This warning is inadequate - the phrases where BEFORE in this sense would be acceptable are not specified - but, together with the examples given, it may have the effect of alerting the language producer to the restricted use of BEFORE,

persuading him in favour of IN FRONT OF, which is acceptable in contexts where either meaning is intended.

LDOCE does not distinguish between BEFORE in the sense of IN THE PRESENCE OF and BEFORE as contrasted with BEHIND. It gives no 'formal' marker or usage note and indeed the definition and examples seem actively to encourage errors of register: LDOCE in front of; she stood before him; the wide lands lying before the travellers.

The entry in LDOCE is designed to help the learner-reader by giving examples of possible meanings he might find given to the word. It does not illustrate typical contemporary use and is of little help to the learner-writer.

Although the label 'formal' was adequate to prevent these errors in the contexts in which I found them, the learner might find it misleading. In many situations which require 'formal' behaviour, these lexical items, marked 'formal' in the dictionaries, would still be inappropriate.

Category 2: Collocational errors

I use the term 'collocation' rather loosely, and include not only those restricted word combinations which are inexplicable in terms of meaning, but also words which operate within a restricted range, acceptable only when used in conjunction with a lexical set holding some semantic features in common. Although meaning does play a part in this type of collocability the non-native may not know which meaning features are significant.

Great: I WOULD LIKE TO DO SOME INTERNATIONAL COMMERCE IN A GREAT FIRM

GREAT in the sense in which it is intended here is defined by ALD and CULD without any indication of range restrictions: ALD well above average in size, quantity or degree; CULD very large, loud etc. LDOCE gives a similar definition but does not include 'large in size'. Collocation restrictions are indicated for its use in this sense: LDOCE big (usu before another adj of size). This is similar to ALD's listing of another sense of

GREAT: used to emphasise other words describing size: a great big stick; a great many people believe in astronomy. The example in CULD - there was a great crowd of people at the football match - may also suggest that GREAT is an indication of size only when used as an intensifier with a word for something that is characteristically large.

I consider the use of GREAT in my example as a collocational error because its use in one particular sense has been extended beyond the appropriate context. As is the case with several of the collocational errors I examined, the word acquires a different and unintended meaning outside its restricted contextual range. From the receptive point of view, GREAT is handled quite adequately by the dictionaries, with each sense of the word placed in an appropriate context. The writer or speaker, however, could quite easily misuse the word after consulting ALD or CULD. ALD's well above average in size seems to fit perfectly the writer in my survey's meaning.

A short usage note seems justified, considering the frequency with which GREAT is misused. The note in Fowler's Modern English Usage is helpful: 'GREAT does sometimes mean of remarkable size - the sense that it has for the most part resigned to LARGE and BIG - but it is so used where size is to be represented as causing emotion'.

Driver: ...THE PEDAL, WHICH ALLOWS THE BICYCLE TO MOVE WHEN IT IS PRESSED BY THE FEET OF THE DRIVER

Drive: IT CAN BE DRIVED [sic] BY ONE PERSON ONLY [a bicycle]

There is nothing in the dictionaries under DRIVE or DRIVER to suggest that their use is inappropriate with BICYCLE (although all three collocate BICYCLE with the headword RIDE, and RIDE or RIDING with the headword BICYCLE). Riding usually involves sitting with the legs astride, but the non-native is not to know that this distinguishing feature is important. ALD and LDOCE give similar definitions of DRIVE: LDOCE to guide and control (a horse or a vehicle); ALD operate, direct the course of a railway engine, bus, motor-car or other vehicle. As a bicycle is a vehicle, these definitions are clearly inadequate for productive purposes. LDOCE even gives BICYCLE as an example

under the headword VEHICLE, and its mention of 'horse' is particularly misleading for the learner who knows the collocation RIDE/HORSE.

CULD's definition is shorter and once again covers fewer alternatives, it is therefore slightly less inducive to lexical error. Nevertheless, 'etc' suggests a wider collocational range: to control or guide (a car etc.)

Pursue: I PURSUED A TWO-YEAR DIPLOMA COURSE
I AM NOW PURSUING A BSc HONOURS DEGREE COURSE
I WANT TO PURSUE [A] PhD DEGREE IN PHYSICS
BEFORE COMING TO ASTON TO PURSUE A POST-GRADUATE DEGREE

The writers of these sentences have extended the collocational range of PURSUE which is defined: LDOCE to continue (steadily) with; ALD go on with, work at; CULD to occupy oneself with, to continue. All three dictionaries collocate PURSUE with STUDIES but do not warn that, although it is possible to talk of 'pursuing' studies, enquiries or a course of action, a less abstract direct object may suggest another related meaning of PURSUE; ALD to go after in order to catch up with, capture or kill.

It seems to me that those contexts where PURSUE takes the direct object DEGREE are definitely inappropriate, while PURSUE A COURSE is marginally more acceptable. This, however, I leave to the judgement of the reader.

One area where non-native speakers often need help is in the use of adjectives derived from verbs. Such adjectives are potentially acceptable (cf Leech 1974:211) but they may have a more limited collocational range than their parent verbs, or they may not be established members of the English lexicon at all. The lexical rules which determine acceptability in word formation and transfer of meaning are quite haphazard, and moreover there are degrees of acceptability, with marginal cases which are neither definitely acceptable nor definitely unacceptable, but which merely sound odd in most contexts. Adjectives formed from verbs are given very little treatment in dictionaries intended for native speaker use,

and the learners' dictionaries have not altered in this practice. The following error is an example of the kind of problem that can occur:

Declined: YOU ARE IN A DECLINED ROAD USE YOUR BRAKE

This error is not purely lexical because (like the accepted form SLOPING) DECLINING as opposed to DECLINED would have greater potential appropriacy. ALD and CULD prevent the error by making no mention of DECLINE in its literal sense: to slant or slope downward (OED). LDOCE indicates that the word may indeed have this meaning: to slope or move downwards; about two miles east, the land begins to decline towards the river. LDOCE gives no information about the appropriate use of adjectives formed from DECLINE, and there is no note that, although it is possible to speak of DECLINING HEALTH, SALES or MORALS, a DECLINING ROAD in the literal sense is not acceptable.

Category 3: Errors of meaning

I regard 'drive a bicycle' as a collocational error because the easiest way of illustrating the difference in meaning between RIDE and DRIVE is to cite the nouns which collocate with each. Nevertheless the native speaker regards RIDE and DRIVE as being different actions, and there is some overlap between errors in category 2 and errors in category 3.

Category 3 errors were the most numerous in my survey and probably best test the efficacy of the dictionaries. Learners' dictionaries could do more to guide their users in matters of register and collocation, but their main objective is to make clear what words mean, so that the learner can understand them in context and can be understood when he uses them in his own utterances. Most of the errors of meaning I found resulted from only a slightly different frame of reference regarding a lexical item. In many cases the non-native assigns a broader sense to the word than it has in normal use, and often the chosen word has unfavourable connotations of which the learner is unaware.

The first error I examined in this category was accounted for fairly well by the dictionaries, but other errors of meaning were not adequately explained.

Exposé: THE FOLLOWING EXPOSÉ OF THE ORGANISATION OF MY BANK

ALD gives two definitions of EXPOSÉ: 1. orderly setting out or précis of a body of facts or beliefs. 2. making public of discreditable fact(s). The writer in my survey clearly intended EXPOSÉ in the sense listed first by ALD, but in everyday language I doubt that this is a real alternative to the second 'bad' sense of the word. LDOCE and CULD give only one (neutral) definition of EXPOSÉ with an indication of its unfavourable sense in brackets: LDOCE (esp shameful): CULD (sometimes outspoken).

Fowler's Modern English Usage is out of sympathy with EXPOSÉ whichever meaning it is used to express: 'EXPOSÉ is an unwanted gallicism; EXPOSITION will serve in one of its senses and EXPOSURE in the other'.

Casual: A CASUAL THUNDERSTORM

ALD gives two definitions of EXPOSÉ, only one of which fits the meaning intended by the speaker in my survey. The two definitions, however, clearly overlap, the second simply including an unfavourable aspect which the first one lacks. The various meanings of CASUAL, on the other hand, are not so obviously related. ALD lists three: 1. happening by chance. 2. careless, undesigned, unmethodical; informal. 3. irregular, not continued. CULD separates the senses careless and informal, and LDOCE expands the number of senses to six by adding uninterested and not close, but happening by chance - the meaning intended in A CASUAL THUNDERSTORM - might not appear to be connected with the other meanings of CASUAL; the non-native could be forgiven for believing that it had an independent existence, unaffected by the connotations surrounding CASUAL in other contexts. Moreover, the examples given to illustrate CASUAL in the sense of happening by chance do not suggest that it has a limited collocational range: a casual meeting (LDOCE; ALD) a casual remark (CULD).

The meaning of CASUAL is shifting so that what was merely connotative in an earlier sense (the careless, informal element) is now becoming criterial. The definition happening by chance reflects an earlier sense of

CASUAL and, following the pattern of OED, both ALD and LDOCE list it first. This is certainly misleading for non-natives in a hurry to discover a 'base' meaning for the word in modern use. CULD lists happening by chance third out of the four meanings it gives for CASUAL, and lists not careful (enough) first, according to its policy of arranging meanings in order of frequency. It seems to me that in colloquial English CASUAL in the sense of happening by chance always suggests informality. A chance encounter with a colleague at a business meeting would not be a casual one, for example. Properties of CASUAL that are criterial to it in other senses have a connotative value here, with the result that A CASUAL THUNDERSTORM (as opposed to A CHANCE THUNDERSTORM) is anomalous.

Interesting: NOWADAYS THE INTERESTING THING IS TO PRODUCE A SAFE RELIABLE CAR

FINALLY I THINK THE SECOND SOLUTION IS QUITE INTERESTING. SO I WOULD RECOMMEND IT BECAUSE IT IS NOT EXPENSIVE COMPARED TO THE OTHERS, AND IT TAKES ONE YEAR.

What did the writers (Algerian postgraduate engineering students) mean by INTERESTING in these contexts? As in the case of CASUAL these writers may have chosen a sense close to one of the senses of a cognate word they knew, but which was rare or obsolete in English. OED lists as obsolete INTERESTING in the sense: that concerns, touches or affects; important. Was this the meaning intended by the writer in the first example, his message being that the production of a safe, reliable motor car now MATTERS (whereas in the past car manufacturers were less concerned about safety and reliability)?

In its definition of INTERESTING in the modern sense (adapted to excite interest; of interest) OED refers us to INTEREST the noun, which is defined as the fact or quality of mattering; concernment; importance and the relationship of being concerned or affected in respect of advantage or detriment, among other things. This suggests a further meaning of INTERESTING in my two examples - the writers might have meant to imply some financial advantage, as in 'an interesting proposition'. This seems particularly probable in the second example. The meaning of the

verb INTEREST sheds light on the most common senses of INTERESTING in native speech. OED gives to affect with a feeling of concern; to excite the curiosity or attention of, and the quotation from Dickens which illustrates this meaning - your account of the first night interested me immensely - seems to surround the verb with a connotation of enjoyment which often attaches itself to the modern use of INTEREST and INTERESTING, but which seems to be absent from earlier senses, and from the intended sense of INTERESTING in my example. Roget's Thesaurus lists ABSORBING, ATTRACTIVE, APPEALING, ENGAGING, MAGNETIC, PROVOCATIVE, EXCITING, ENTERTAINING, AMUSING, DIVERTING, and PLEASING as synonyms for INTERESTING. Most of these suggest pleasure or entertainment.

The dictionaries, however, do not mention this aspect of INTERESTING at all. All three define INTERESTING in terms of INTEREST the noun, and this is defined as concerning CURIOSITY and PROFIT. Only ALD makes it really clear which kind of INTEREST (of the many listed) INTERESTING holding the attention; arousing interest (1) refers to. INTEREST (1) is condition of wanting to know or learn about sth or sb, a definition which greatly aids our understanding of INTERESTING in everyday use. The other dictionaries do not have a numbering system like this, and do not define INTERESTING at all except in terms of INTEREST: LDOCE INTERESTING which takes and keeps one's interest; CULD INTERESTING arousing interest. They both offer various definitions of INTEREST, the first one of which, LDOCE readiness to give attention, CULD curiosity, attention, might allow the dictionary user to interpret INTERESTING in a sense which fits at least the first of the examples in my survey discussed above.

A learner who had not yet developed an intuitive knowledge of the appropriate uses of INTEREST and INTERESTING would find the information in the learners' dictionaries (particularly LDOCE and CULD) confusing rather than illuminating.

Education: MY EDUCATION HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME BY MY PARENTS AND BY SOME TEACHERS AT SCHOOL. I THINK THAT MY PARENTS HAVE ACHIEVED THEIR RESPONSIBILITY IN GIVING ME A GOOD

EDUCATION, THAT IS TO SAY THE EDUCATION OF EVERYDAY LIFE. AT SCHOOL I'VE LEARNT A GENERAL EDUCATION WHICH WAS WELL TAUGHT.

This comment was written in response to the instruction 'write about your education so far'. The compilers of the test paper expected an account of schooling and qualifications, but this writer has interpreted EDUCATION in a broader sense; she has attached a scene to her sense of the word which, most of the time for native speakers, is lacking.

The writer is quite clear what she means by EDUCATION - it is of two types, 'the education of everyday life', which takes place in the family, and 'general education', which takes place at school. This accords well with the definitions in OED, the earlier of which concerns the manner in which a person has been brought up, and the later the systematic instruction, schooling or training given to the young.

ALD and CULD define EDUCATION in terms of this second sense of the word, but LDOCE, presumably in an attempt to cover both meanings of the word in a short entry, is misleading and tends to suggest EDUCATION in the sense of UPBRINGING, a sense which it now rarely has: (the result of) teaching or training of mind and character: she had had a good education.

Conclusions

Dictionaries tend to be judged by the number and type of headwords listed and the ease with which the definitions can be understood. Reviewers approach their task from the receptive rather than the productive point of view, and look for the words that a learner might hear or read, rather than the meanings that she might have difficulty in expressing. In this survey I have examined the dictionaries from the point of view of the learner-writer, and my results suggest that all three dictionaries can seriously mislead the student, even in the choice of comparatively common words. The following suggestions are intended to guide the dictionary makers in their compilation of any new

production-oriented dictionary, so that problems of the type I have discussed can be avoided in the future.

- As in CULD, alternative meanings for polysemic words should be listed as far as possible in order of their frequency of occurrence in current English use. Unusual meanings should be omitted or labelled clearly to warn the user of their restricted applicability.

- Where surveys of learner errors have shown that one word is frequently chosen in place of another, more appropriate one, the two words should be cross-referenced and their distinguishing features made clear.

- There should be a wide range of labels marking appropriate register. Where possible, there should be cross-references to alternative words in other registers.

- Where surveys show that there is a common misconception about the behaviour or meaning of a word, there should be a usage note to prevent error.

- Selectional restrictions and collocational restrictions should be specified for each entry. One or two examples do not give sufficient information for the learner who wants to know if a word is appropriate in a particular context.

- One-word definitions should be avoided, as they encourage the learner to believe in false equivalences between words.

- Words with 'bad' connotations should always be clearly labelled.

- Words formed from other words, for example, adjectives formed from past and present participles of verbs, should be given full and separate treatment. If the meaning or appropriate range differs with respect to the parent word, this should be made clear.

- Words which can best be understood in terms of national culture should be explained in these terms - or the user could perhaps be referred to a companion work.

Perhaps I am asking too much of the dictionary makers. A lot of information must be fitted into a dictionary, and the compiler of a relatively compact general dictionary certainly does not have the space to provide a complete range of appropriate contexts for every word (cf Cowie 1978). It may be significant to this study, however, that while lexicographers claim to define those words:

> 'that the learner is likely to come across in everyday English speech, in official and formal writing'
> (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Introduction)

they have not, as far as I am aware, drawn upon any survey of the very words learners confuse in their own speech and writing.

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